

## ANCIENT INDIAN BUDDHISM AND AHIṂSĀ

In historic India, the concept of ahiṁsā was used for the first time by the authors of the *Upaniṣads* in connection with the cruelty of Vedic *yajñas*.<sup>1</sup> It is from this that the concept of vegetarianism developed. In the fifth century BCE it was strongly advocated by the Buddha, who included it amongst his main teachings, provided it a theoretical basis and regarded it as of incomparable merit. It may be pointed out that one of the fundamental contributions of Buddhism in the sphere of ahiṁsā was that the image of the wheel (*cakra*) as a symbol of sacred warfare (most famously the chariot wheel) was changed into a symbol of sacred peacemaking (the “dhamma wheel” or *dharmacakra*).<sup>2</sup> Buddhist insights regarding ahiṁsā turn out to be applicable to areas as diverse as environmental ethics, daily living, relations with and ethical considerations regarding other animals, and surely our need to understand the plight of marginalized humans.

Violent actions in the context of early Indian Buddhism may broadly be put in the following four categories:

1. Hiṁsā that took place through organized fighting such as wars, battles etc. and in an unorganized fighting such as murders, suicides, abortions, and euthanasia etc.
2. Hiṁsā that took place in the form of sacrifices in which animal life and sometimes human life was destroyed.
3. Hiṁsā that took place at the hands of hunters, trappers, butchers, fishermen etc. for human food and other needs, especially for medicinal purposes. Thus, human consumption of meat and fish entailed an important form of violence.
4. Hiṁsā that took place through farming and other related activities like digging, irrigating, ploughing, reaping, trampling on grasses and crops, cutting of trees and destruction of *ekindriya jīva* (one-facultied life) which inhabits plants, trees, soil etc.

We live in a world of mutual injury where life can only be sustained by marginalizing others. In a situation such as this, violence in one form or the other is unavoidable. In order to live, one must eat, and for that most amongst us acquire our food through the capture of various kinds of animal and aquatic life. Some take to vegetarianism to escape such a killing. However, some believe that plants also possess life, and from their point of view even this cannot be called a correct way of life. Moreover, when one is attacked by others, there arises the question of indulging in violence in self-defence. Then, there is the question of various kinds of insects like flies and mosquitoes being regularly eliminated in large numbers in order to minimize the risk of the harmful germs carried by them. Various kinds of drugs also kill germs in the body so that humans can recover from different ailments. As a matter of fact, germ theory which forms the very basis of modern medicine involves elimination of life in different forms. Scientists conduct experiments on animals in order to find cures for diseases that afflict humans. Therefore, if the principle of ahiṁsā is upheld literally, it would be difficult, to say the least, to obtain suitable food to maintain one’s own life and probably one shall have to starve oneself to death, i.e., commit suicide. Strictly speaking, suicide is also inconsistent with the principle of ahiṁsā. In other words, the practice of perfect and absolute ahiṁsā in this particular sense is impossible.

However, Buddhism saw the inner feeling of the spirit of ahiṁsā and its outer manifestation in the form of non-violent action, as two different things. Thus, the Buddha based his philosophy of

---

<sup>1</sup>*Atha yat tapo dānam ārjavam ahiṁsā satya-vacanam iti, tā asya dakṣiṇāḥ* (Chāndogya Up.III.17.4).

<sup>2</sup>Christopher S. Queen, “The Peace Wheel: Nonviolent Activism in the Buddhist Tradition,” D.L. Smith-Christopher (ed) *Subverting Hatred: The Challenge of Nonviolence in Religious Traditions*, Boston: Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, 1998:25-28.

ahiṃsā on this simple fact that even though the action of ahiṃsā maybe difficult to perfect, yet the perfection of the spirit of ahiṃsā is not impossible to cultivate in the heart. In other words, the actual practice of ahiṃsā can only be undertaken on the basis of a true cognition of life, the contradictions of which are difficult to resolve. Recognizing this fact, the Buddha did not set up unduly strict rules for ahiṃsā as action. This form of moderate and rational doctrine of ahiṃsā is perhaps the most important contribution of Buddhism to human civilization. In the Pāli texts, this principle is stated mainly in three terms, viz., *pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*, *pāṇātipātā paṭivirati* and *ahiṃsā*. Of these three terms, *ahiṃsā* or *avihiṃsā*, meaning ‘non-violence,’ is the most widely used in the Buddhist texts. The other two expressions indicate the same meaning of ‘abstaining or restraining oneself from *causing injury to living beings*’ (*pāṇātipātā/ pāṇavadha/ pāṇaghāta*)<sup>3</sup> and are used mainly in relation to *Vinaya* rules regarding *sīla* that forbid the killing of living creatures as against destroying life (*pāṇaṇ atimāpeti*).<sup>4</sup> Here, a special meaning in the form of precautionary endeavour and the application of will is contained in the words *veramaṇī* (abstaining) and *paṭivirati* (restraining). The endeavour of will is imperative for abstaining from evil proclivities such as destruction of life in any form. When the vow is made, ‘I will observe the principle not to kill living beings,’ *sīla* is the self-actualizing attitude that emerges when one undertakes to carry on this endeavour. A child does not commit hiṃsā, and yet there is no *sīla*. The reason for this is that the child is not conscious of the fact that it is not doing evil. In the same manner, it cannot be said that one abides by *sīla* just because one does not kill living creatures. Ahiṃsā, thus, implies *deliberate* avoidance of injury to living beings. In other words, a Buddhist is expected not only to shun killing but also avoid inciting others to kill.

Ahiṃsā to living beings, which is the first precept in Buddhism,<sup>5</sup> is based upon the principle of mutual attraction and rightness common to all nature. To willfully take life means to disrupt and destroy the inherent wholeness and to blunt feelings of reverence and compassion that form the basis of humaneness. This precept is really a call to life and creation even as it is a condemnation of death and destruction. Deliberately to shoot, knife, strangle, drown, crush, poison, burn, or otherwise inflict pain on a human being or animal- these are not the only ways to defile this precept. To cause another to kill, torture, or harm any living being likewise offends against the first precept. Though violence (*hiṃsā*) can take place in words, thoughts and deeds, ancient Indian Buddhism was mainly concerned with violence in deeds. Sacrifices in various forms, especially the ones in which animals were deprived of life, were seen by the Buddha as not only a ridiculous absurdity, but also as an unpardonable cruelty. He did not recognize the efficacy of sacrifices on the one hand, and highly regarded the life of living beings, on the other. According to him, “all living beings are not to be harmed.”<sup>6</sup> “At the sort of sacrifice... (where)... creatures are put an end to... is neither of great fruitfulness nor of great profit; nor of great renown; nor of widespread effect. It is just as if a farmer were to enter a wood taking with him plough and seed, and were there, in an untilled tract, in unfavourable soil, among uprooted stumps, to plant seeds that were broken, rotten, spoilt by wind and heat, out of season, not in good condition, and the god were not to give good rain in due season.”<sup>7</sup> We are told in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* that “the bhikkhu, putting away the killing of living beings holds aloof from the destruction of life. The cudgel and the sword he has laid aside, and ashamed of roughness, and full of mercy, he dwells compassionate and kind to all creatures that have life.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Vin.I.83, 85, 193; D.I.4, III.68, 70, 149, 182, 235; M.I.361, III.23; Sn.242; KhA.26; It.63; J.III.181; Pug.39, DhA.II.19, III.355; DA.I.69; PvA.27f, 33.

<sup>4</sup>D.I.52.

<sup>5</sup>The other four precepts being: 2. not to take what is not given; 3. not to engage in improper sexuality; 4. not to lie; 5. not to cause others to use liquors or drugs that confuse or weaken the mind nor to do so oneself.

<sup>6</sup>GS.II.183.

<sup>7</sup>DB.II.307f.

<sup>8</sup>DB.I.79. Similarly, in one of the verses of the *Dhammapada*, (v275) it has been pointed out that one does not become noble through the killing of living beings, but through *ahiṃsā* towards all of them (“*Na tena ariyo hoti, yena pāṇāni hiṃsati, / Ahiṃsā sabbapāṇānaṃ, ariyo'ti pavuccati.*”)

The basis of the practice of ahiṁsā is compassion (*dayā*), mercy (*hitānukampā*) and a feeling of shame (*lajjā*) of the cruelty of killing and injuring life. In this way, ahiṁsā has been amalgamated by Buddhism with compassion and a consciousness of shame. Where there is compassion in the heart, it is expressed in an outward act as ahiṁsā. Ahiṁsā is considered a noble act because it is not only the object of the act, but it also results in happiness to the one who practices it. On the other hand, those who harbour hatred, not only injure others but also bring unhappiness to themselves.<sup>9</sup> The killing of living beings is a shameful act and is wrong because it opposes the spirit of compassion. Moreover, when ahiṁsā is practiced one comes to know the true feeling of love and attains happiness. The attainment of this kind of happiness is said to be spiritually of a highly exalted state.<sup>10</sup> In this way, taking delight in ahiṁsā, and cultivating a mind of compassion (*mettā-citta-bhāvanā*), are one and the same. Thus, to develop a compassionate heart is to desire happiness and well-being of all living beings. In Buddhism, ahiṁsā is taught from the standpoint that all people love their own lives and do not wish to be hurt or killed by others. This feeling of self-preservation and self-love is transferred in thought to other people and in this way the love for and protection of life come to be promoted. For instance, the *Dhammapada* echoes this very thought by pointing out that as all fear death, comparing others with oneself one should neither kill nor cause to kill.<sup>11</sup>

The application of ahiṁsā makes one aware of the true feeling of love and leads to the attainment of happiness, and, further this happiness is also said to be spiritually a highly exalted state. To develop a compassionate heart is to desire that all living beings shall reach a state of happiness, tranquillity and well-being, and then to awaken in oneself the feeling of compassion towards innumerable and infinite kinds of life, and thus, encompassing all life by the thought of compassion. This is called the mind of boundless compassion (*mettā-appamaññā*). Again, the fact that ahiṁsā has as its basis the compassionate mind it also merges with the principle of the emancipation of mind by the power of compassion (*mettā-cetovimutti*). This principle means that the mind achieves serenity by developing a compassionate heart and thus attains emancipation. In Buddhism, ahiṁsā is not just confined to the ethical rule that one should love all living beings. It goes far beyond that and recognizes in a religious sense that by practising it the lofty heights of Buddhahood can be realized. Therefore, in Buddhism the practice of ahiṁsā is taught in many ways. For example, right action (*sammākammanā*) in the *Noble Eightfold Path* can be explained and interpreted as ahiṁsā.<sup>12</sup> Again, in the highly regarded *dasakusalakammapatha* (Path of Ten Kinds of Good Actions), the first step is that of not killing living beings.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, when the Buddha taught the correct daily conduct of a lay follower to Sīṅgālika, the first principle expounded was that of non-killing of beings.<sup>14</sup>

The lay follower (*upāsaka, upāsikā*) is exhorted to follow the *pañcasīla* (Five Precepts) of which the first one is that of non-injury to living beings (*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ*). As a result, the lay follower undertakes to abstain from injury to living beings not only as a matter of intent but also by actualizing it in action. Even despite having the intent, when one cannot practice it in real life on certain occasions, the precept is broken. This sort of breach of the precept means that while the *intent* of ahiṁsā is there, the selfish desires opposed to this intent are very strong. In such circumstances, there is inevitably a regret for the breach of the precept and thus, confession

---

<sup>9</sup>“Hatred never ceases by hatred in this world. Through loving kindness it comes to an end. This is an ancient law.” (Dh.v5). “Who kills not, nor aught causes to be killed;/Who robs not, not makes others rob, for all/ Within his heart hath share, he hateth none.” (GS.IV.104.)

<sup>10</sup>“The sage who injures none/ who aye controls himself,/ Goes to the everlasting state/ where those who go don’t grieve.” (Dh.v225.); “Gotama’s disciples are always well awake;/ Both day and night their minds in harmlessness delight.” (Dh.v300); “With all am I a friend, comrade to all,/ And to all creatures kind and merciful;/ A heart of amity I cultivate,/And ever in good-will is my delight.” (Thā.v648).

<sup>11</sup>Dh.v129.

<sup>12</sup>M.III.251.

<sup>13</sup>D.III.269.

<sup>14</sup>D.III.181.

(*paṭidesanā*) is made. However, this confession must come from the heart. The importance of the doctrine of *ahiṃsā* in Buddhism can be measured from the fact that the precept of *ahiṃsā* is included in the *Aṭṭhaṅgika-uposatha* (Eight Precepts) which are practised by the Buddhists on the four days of *uposatha* (fast) of the month. It is also included as the first of the ten precepts for the *sāmaṇera* and *sāmaṇerī*. The non-killing of life is given in great detail in the *Pātimokkha*, in the *Vinaya* of the bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs. As per the third precept of the *Pārājikā* in the *Pātimokkha* a monk or a nun is expelled from the Saṃgha for committing a murder, which is the severest punishment for the members of the Saṃgha. Buddhism condemns strongly the one “who should deliberately and purposely (*iticcittamano cittasaṃkappo*) in various ways praise the beauty of death or should incite (anyone) to death.”<sup>15</sup> The *methods* of causing death mentioned in the *Vinaya* are many and varied, including the use of weapons, devices ranging from pits and traps to more subtle psychological strategies like frightening someone to death by dressing up as a ghost, and, of course, death resulting from unsuccessful medical treatments. In terms of *intention*, the examples show that guilt is firmly tied to state of mind (*mens rea*) of the accused at the time the offence was committed. Guilt or innocence depends upon the outcome tallying with the intention with which one undertook the project in question. The concept of *agency* is important where other parties are involved as intermediaries, as when one monk instructs another to carry out a lethal plan. Generally speaking in the *Vinaya*, an action which requires intention for it to be an offence is no offence at all if there *is* no bad intention. Moreover, as Andrew Huxley has shown, the *Kurudhamma Jātaka*<sup>16</sup> emphasizes the idea that, at least in a lay context, unintended harm to others should not be counted against one, and it is not wise to agonize over such matters.<sup>17</sup> Buddhism places abortion on the same level as killing a human being. Suicide is also forbidden in Buddhism.<sup>18</sup>

There is a ban on injuring plant life<sup>19</sup> and, thus, according to the Buddha, the perfect person abstains from injury both to seed life and plant life” (*bījaḡāma bhūtagāma*).<sup>20</sup> He called upon all “for having compassion on creatures.”<sup>21</sup> The Buddha felt that the humane sentiment of mankind is not to be limited merely to themselves but to be extended to all sentient beings, who should share as much kindness as mankind itself does. The Buddha taught “never to destroy the life of any living creature, however tiny it might be.”<sup>22</sup> It is even forbidden to throw the remains of food on green grass or into water because the creatures living in both water and grass can be harmed.<sup>23</sup> According to him “making onslaught on creatures, being cruel, bloody-handed, intent on injury and killing, and without mercy on living creatures... is conducive to shortness of life span”<sup>24</sup> and saw it as repulsive (*āmagandha*).<sup>25</sup> Not even “for the sake of sustaining life would we intentionally deprive any being of life,”<sup>26</sup> said the Buddha. Monk are forbidden from digging soil.<sup>27</sup> Water must be strained before drinking because it contains living things<sup>28</sup> and only that fruit should be eaten which “has not yet any seed in it... (or)...

---

<sup>15</sup>Vin.III.73.

<sup>16</sup>J.III.366-381.

<sup>17</sup>A. Huxley, “The Kurudhamma: From Ethics to Statecraft.” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 2, 1995: 191-203.

<sup>18</sup>Vin.III.73, 82.

<sup>19</sup>*Pācittiya* nos. 10 & 11.

<sup>20</sup>GS.II.222.

<sup>21</sup>S.V.241.

<sup>22</sup>SBE.XVII.30; XX.128.

<sup>23</sup>SBE.XVII.22.

<sup>24</sup>MLS.III.250.

<sup>25</sup>SBE.X(2).39.

<sup>26</sup>GS.IV.129.

<sup>27</sup>Vin.IV.33.

<sup>28</sup>BD.III.3; J.I.83.

has no more seed in it.”<sup>29</sup>

All those following bloody and cruel occupations (*kurūrakammantā*) such as a butcher, fowler, hunter, fisherman, bandit, executioner, and jailer are seen by Buddhism with a distinct disfavour.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, professions involving cutting, flogging, binding, highway-robbery, and plundering are considered as violent and heinous.<sup>31</sup> A cattle-butcher suffers for “many hundred thousands of years in purgatory.”<sup>32</sup> “One neither sees or hears of a butcher slaughtering and selling cattle-- rams, pigs... or beasts of the forest and living in the abundance of great wealth.”<sup>33</sup> Some of the *kammic* results, which a man brings upon himself by committing injury to a life are “suffering in an unpleasant state for a long period, and rebirth in some lower form of being. If born again as man, he may be infirm, ugly, unpopular, cowardly, divested of compassion, subject to disease, dejected and mournful, separated from the company of loved ones, and unable to attain to ripe age.”<sup>34</sup> In Buddhism, the circumstances under which a being is killed as well as the physical and mental development of the being decide the gravity of the moral guilt involved in killing. The *kammic* “result of killing a man and killing a child vary in proportion to the physical and mental development of the two.”<sup>35</sup>

However, in unavoidable circumstance “indirect killing” was allowed in early Buddhism. For instance, early Buddhism allowed “the use of skins, such as sheep-skins, goat-skins and deer-skins as coverlets in all the border countries.”<sup>36</sup> It was also permitted that raw flesh and blood may be used in case of non-human disease.<sup>37</sup> In one of the *Jātakas*, it has been pointed out that “in certain cases a Bodhisatta may destroy life.”<sup>38</sup> At one place the Bodhisatta indulged in “killing deer and pig, and eating the flesh broiled,”<sup>39</sup> then with others chased a thief and “kicked and cuffed him.”<sup>40</sup> We also come across the Bodhisatta selling meat for a coin.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, contradictions arise when the Bodhisatta is born as a carnivorous animal and has to kill not only for himself, but also for his herd and in fact, in such cases the Bodhisatta specializes in killing and hunting techniques.<sup>42</sup> However, here it may be important to remember that most of such contradictions appear in the *Jātaka* commentary which is a composition of a very late stage. Moreover, regarding unavoidable violence committed by animals for the purposes of food, it seems as if Pāli Buddhism in general leaves the animals alone to fulfill the dhamma of their own existence.

It has been generally pointed out that the attitude of ancient Indian Buddhism towards “warfare, agriculture and meat-eating was more mixed than was its attitude to blood sacrifices. It made no whole-hearted condemnation of these three practices although they all entail the taking of life.”<sup>43</sup> Though soldiers were not admitted into monkhood,<sup>44</sup> and monks were told to stay away from watching

---

<sup>29</sup>SBE.XX.75.

<sup>30</sup>KS.II.171, A.III.383; Pug.56; PugA.233; PvA.

<sup>31</sup>GS.II.223.

<sup>32</sup>KS.II.170.

<sup>33</sup>GS.III.273.

<sup>34</sup>H. Saddhatissa: *Buddhist Ethics: Essence of Buddhism*, New York: G. Braziller, 1970: 89.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid*: 1970: 88.

<sup>36</sup>SBE.XVII.39.

<sup>37</sup>SBE.XVII.49.

<sup>38</sup>J..II, 265; III.296.

<sup>39</sup>J.IV.272.

<sup>40</sup>J.I.219.

<sup>41</sup>J.I.295.

<sup>42</sup>The *Jātakas* are full of such incidents. The Bodhisatta is born 8 times as a lion and thrice as a vulture.

<sup>43</sup>I.B. Horner: “Early Buddhism and Taking of Life,” D.R. Bhandarkar, K.A. Nilakanta Sastri *et al* (eds), *B.C. Law Volume*, I, Calcutta, 1945: 443.

<sup>44</sup>SBE.XIII.196, 230.

wars or walking the armies,<sup>45</sup> and yet the Buddhist attitude appears somewhat contradictory. There are some similes and examples given in the *Vinaya* and *Sutta Piṭaka* in which fighting men and martial qualities are emulated. For instances, monks are often told to be steadfast as in battle and to wage spiritual *battles* like the armed ones.<sup>46</sup> There are certain *Jātaka* stories in which the Bodhisatta participates in a battle “to win renown... raising his battle cry as he dashed into the fight.”<sup>47</sup> Despite the drum of non-killing being sounded through a town,<sup>48</sup> its having been heard by the kings of yore<sup>49</sup> and landlords laying interdiction upon the slaughter of animals,<sup>50</sup> killing of animals continued on a large scale at least till the days of Asoka.<sup>51</sup> Except perhaps bringing about a decrease in the popularity of great sacrifices, in the other fields of violence, Buddhism appears to have met with very little success due to the following two reasons:<sup>52</sup>

1. Masses as well as the rulers did not want to give up these ways of ministering to their ambitions, pleasure or livelihood.
2. The Buddha was not a temporal ruler, hence, he had no actual power to impose a body of restrictive regulations and penalties on the laity as he had on his monastic followers.

In *Matakabhatta Jātaka*, the Bodhisatta thinking about killers, expresses a desire: “If only these beings (*sattā*) perceived the outcome of sinning, maybe they would stay away from killing.”<sup>53</sup> He also uttered the following stanza on this occasion:

“If people were only aware that penalty would be birth unto sorrow, living beings would stop taking life. Sorrow is indeed killer’s lot.”<sup>54</sup>

The Buddhist concept of *ahiṃsā* has two facets: 1. negative which covers injury inspired by compassion, self-restrain, and the desire to alleviate pain; and 2. positive which covers non-injury inspired by the same motive and desire and intention. In other words, positive objective considerations justify injury as an expression of nonviolence. Thus dual concept on nonviolence is realistic. The negative aspect is based on the recognition of the fact that the universe as such is suffused with death and destruction. No one can survive and live in the world without committing one or the other kind of violence. The positive aspect of nonviolence partakes of the nature of a moral ideal without which no social, human, or cosmic order can survive. Violence cannot be eschewed completely and is inescapable in certain critical situations. In other words, in certain situations application of negative aspect of nonviolence is unavoidable. One can see certain examples of the application of the negative concept of nonviolence, namely injury with a view to alleviate pain, or violent defence of the honour of women. Buddhism also makes a distinction between man and animals plus plants, seeds etc. Though destruction of or injury to both involves sin, there is a difference of degree. The sin accrued by killing a man is more than the cutting of a plant. Further, sin accrued as a result of killing a person with a developed mind is more than in the case of a man whose mind is less developed.

---

<sup>45</sup>Vin.IV.104-108.

<sup>46</sup>See, for example, A.II.116; III.89, 100, 161; J.II.276.

<sup>47</sup>J.I.205-206.

<sup>48</sup>J.III.428, 434.

<sup>49</sup>J.III.428.

<sup>50</sup>J.IV.115.

<sup>51</sup>I.B. Horner, *Op. Cit.* 348.

<sup>52</sup>I.B. Horner, *Op. Cit.* 439.

<sup>53</sup>J.I.168.

<sup>54</sup>J.I.168.

The Buddhist concept of ahimśā has been directly associated with the so-called agricultural revolution.<sup>55</sup> This agricultural revolution is only an illusion. The idea of economic utility of animals being partly responsible for the unpopularity of sacrifices, was propounded by Horner way back in the 1940s. She had proposed that “the growing realization that large scale sacrifice was both spiritually and economically unsound will have played a decisive part in stamping it out.”<sup>56</sup> Though there may have been some truth in Horner’s argument, but this relationship between economic utility and sacrificial futility should not be stretched too far. It seems that the basic and logical cause behind the propagation of ahimśā by the Buddha was compassion, sympathy, equanimity, forbearance and goodwill, which are generally admired and taken as of great fruit and profit by ancient Indian Buddhism.<sup>57</sup> The Buddha asked every one to “cultivate a boundless (friendly) mind towards all beings,”<sup>58</sup> and not only the agricultural ones. Had the Buddha been really concerned about the sudden need of agricultural animals, he certainly would have included the names of these animals in the list of those whose meat had been declared avoidable by the Buddha. We must bear in mind that none of these animals had any fruitful bearing on agriculture and the loss of their lives would have made no difference whatsoever to agriculture. Strictly speaking, the Buddha considered agricultural activities as entailing violence because they led to destruction of life.<sup>59</sup> The reason as to why the Buddha criticized animal sacrifices, was that they were cruel, illogical and futile. Moreover, cow (especially a milch-cow) which most importantly contributed towards agriculture, had been protected much earlier. In the *Sutta-Nipāta*, “brāhmaṇas of yore” are told as having regarded cows as their parents, brothers and kin, as their best friends and as the source of all healthful things, and hence in gratitude they never killed cows.<sup>60</sup> Also the evidence provided by early Indian Buddhist literature for the suppression of great animal sacrifices suggests that outside the brāhmaṇical circles, this practice was not particularly cherished by the ordinary people.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, finding an association between two existing realities, may itself be full of dangers. For example, if we go by the logic that “society today needs a lowering of the birth rate, celibacy would contribute to the lowering of the birth rate (therefore) the practice of celibacy in the monastic orders of the country reflects the economic needs of the time.”<sup>62</sup> But we know this is not so.

If the statements of the Pāli texts, which presume to be a record of the *Buddhavacana*, are accepted at face value, it can be argued that the Buddha allowed the eating of animal flesh. But are these portions a later interpolation in the Pāli literature? The view of flesh eating is sharply criticized and contradicted by the *Mahāyāna Sūtras*, also purporting to be the spoken words of the Buddha, which categorically assert that flesh eating is contrary to the spirit and intent of the first precept since it makes one an accessory to the slaying of animals and therefore contravenes the compassionate concern for all life that lies at the core of Buddhism. Is there reliable evidence that the Buddha sanctioned flesh eating? Unfortunately no serious attempt has been made by scholars to resolve the glaring discrepancy between the contentions of the two branches of Buddhism on meat eating. Along with this also arises the question as to whether the Buddha died of eating a piece of pork, as claimed by some scholars, or from a poisonous mushroom, as asserted by others. If we go by the Pāli Tipiṭaka as it is, the Buddha did not put a ban on the eating of flesh. A monk is allowed to accept “what has

---

<sup>55</sup>See, for example, amongst others R.S. Sharma: *Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India*, first edition, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1983, paperback reprint, Madras: Macmillan, 1992: 96.

<sup>56</sup>I.B. Horner, *Op. Cit.*: 440.

<sup>57</sup>KS.V.149.

<sup>58</sup>SBE.X(2).25.

<sup>59</sup>Vin.IV.33.

<sup>60</sup>Sn.52.

<sup>61</sup>I.B. Horner, *Op. Cit.*: 442.

<sup>62</sup>G.C. Pande: “On the Question of the Social Origins of Buddhism,” Mahesh Tiwary (ed), *Bodhi-Raśmi*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984: 6.

been put in his alms bowl.”<sup>63</sup> Then, there is the case of Devadatta, the Buddha’s cousin and brother-in-law, who may possibly have been inspired by the total prohibition observed by some *samaṇas* and *brāhmaṇas*.<sup>64</sup> He challenged the Buddha and asked him for a total ban on meat-eating. The Buddha is said to have refused to do so even at the cost of losing some of his followers.<sup>65</sup> Many other references prove, though almost incidentally, that the eating of meat was thought of as customary, and monks are recorded to have eaten flesh and fish frequently enough to give it the appearance of its having been a fairly important part of their diet. Meat, fish, fruit, dairy products and cereals especially rice, constituted the staple food of the population, and the Buddha was strongly convinced that purity did not depend upon food,<sup>66</sup> but on restraint over such bodily, mental and moral conduct as could defile a man.<sup>67</sup>

Pāli based Buddhism allowed monks to eat meat with the following exceptions:

1. In three cases meat may not be eaten by a monk if he has (a) seen, (b) heard or (c) suspected that the meat has been especially acquired for him by killing an animal. In other words, at the time of accepting cooked-meat if a monk has no reason to think that the animal whose flesh he is accepting was not killed on purpose for him, then the monk can accept it.<sup>68</sup> This rule is called the *Rule of Tikoṭiparisuddha* (*Pure in Three Ways*). Pāli Buddhism did not see any sin being committed by meat-eating monks as long as they followed the *Rule of Tikoṭiparisuddha*, even if the meat that they happened to eat had been acquired by somebody by deliberately killing an animal to feed them.<sup>69</sup>
2. Use of raw meat was not allowed,<sup>70</sup> except in case of sickness when “raw flesh and blood could be used.”<sup>71</sup> The cooking and eating of the remains of the kills of lions, tigers, hyenas, and wolves are allowed by the Buddha to be eaten by the monks.<sup>72</sup> The Buddha also allowed “the use of the fat of bears, fish, alligators, swine, asses, if received at the right time to be partaken of with oil.”<sup>73</sup> Indeed, fish and meat are mentioned among the delicate foods (*pāṇitabhojanīya*) which a monk who is ill is allowed to eat.<sup>74</sup>
3. The meat of the following ten beings i.e., man, elephant, horse, dog, snake, lion, tiger, leopard, bear, and hyena is forbidden to be eaten by the monks due to a variety of reasons involved in their eating.<sup>75</sup>

The *Rule of Tikoṭiparisuddha*, though restrained the monks from being directly instrumental in killing animals for meat and to a small extent the “rules prohibiting the eating of meat of socially

---

<sup>63</sup>SBE.III.155.

<sup>64</sup>C.S. Singh, “Meat-Eating and the Rule of *Tikoṭiparisuddha*,” A.K. Narain (ed), *Studies in Pāli and Buddhism*, Delhi, 1979: 289-295.

<sup>65</sup>SBE.XI.196ff; BD.I.297ff.

<sup>66</sup>M.I.80.

<sup>67</sup>A.I.221.

<sup>68</sup>MLS.II.33; BD.I.298.

<sup>69</sup>“The wicked may for gift slay wife or son,/ yet, if the holy eat, no sin is done.” (J.II.182).

<sup>70</sup>D.II.5.

<sup>71</sup>SBE.XVII.49.

<sup>72</sup>BD.I.98.

<sup>73</sup>SBE.VII.43.

<sup>74</sup>Pātimokkha, Pacittiya Dhamma No.33.

<sup>75</sup>SBE.XVII.85.



disapproved beings made up for the limitations,”<sup>76</sup> yet the Pāli Indian Buddhist attitude towards meat-eating and ahiṁsā appears to be somewhat contradictory. The *Mahāyāna Sūtras* deeply deplore any kind of allowance made for the eating of meat. Paradoxically, the *Rule of Tikoṭiparisuddha* absolved the monks of any sin, but the slaughterer was very severely criticized. Thus, these days one often comes across a large number of Theravādīn monks savouring meat. They justify eating meat on the grounds that not only that there are references in the Pāli literature to the Buddha allowing the eating of meat, but they invariably point out that the Buddha, in fact, had died as a result of eating pork (which was putrid, and thus, poisoned the Buddha) at the home of one of his followers called Cunda. They further point out that they gratefully accept whatever is put before them, without preference or aversion. Various statements and actions of the Buddha are used to justify the eating of meat, implying that if the Buddha himself ate flesh food when it was offered to him, surely they have permission to do likewise. The relevant portion of the *Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta* regarding the Buddha’s last meal reads as follows:

“Then Cunda addressed the Lord and Said, “May the Lord, together with the bhikkhus, do me the honour of taking his meal, at my house tomorrow?” And the Lord gave his consent by his silence... Now at the end of the night, Cunda, the smith, prepared at his house sweet rice and cakes, and *sūkara-maddava*.”<sup>77</sup>

*Sūkara-maddava* has been variously translated by scholars. Franke has translated it as “soft (tender) boar’s flesh.”<sup>78</sup> Arthur Waley gives four interpretations of *sūkara-maddava*: a pig’s soft food (food eaten by a pig), pig’s delight (a favourite food of a pig), the soft parts of a pig, or pig-pounded (food trampled by pigs).<sup>79</sup> There are many compound words in Pāli of which *sūkara* (pig) forms a part, e.g., the compound word *sūkara-sāli* is used in Pāli literature for a kind of wild rice.<sup>80</sup> K.E. Neumann as quoted by Waley “has shown that in Narahari’s *Rajanighantu*, among the names of medical plants, there occurs a whole series of compound words having ‘pig’ as their first element; thus *sūkara-kanda*, ‘pig-bulb,’ *sūkara-padika*, ‘pig’s foot,’ *sūkareṣṭa*, ‘sought-out by pigs.’ On the analogy of the last, Neumann takes *sūkara-maddava* to mean ‘pig’s delight,’ and assumes that it is the name of some kind of truffles... Plant names tend to be local and dialectical. It is quite likely that if such an expression as *sūkara-maddava* meant “truffles” in Magadha, it might, in more western and southern centres where Pāli Buddhism came into existence, have been entirely unknown and consequently misunderstood.”<sup>81</sup> T.W. Rhys Davids, in fact, translated it as “quantity of truffles.”<sup>82</sup> The word in Pāli used for pork is *sūkaramaṁsa*.<sup>83</sup> Edward Thomas correctly points out that “The word... is not the obvious *sūkaramaṁsa*, ‘pig flesh,’ which we would expect if this were meant.”<sup>84</sup> C.A.F. Rhys Davids points out that, “A food-compound of pig-flesh (*sūkaramaṁsa*) does occur once in the scriptures,<sup>85</sup> in a *sutta* of a curiously unworthy kind, where a householder, in inviting Gotama to dine, goes through quite a menu in a restrained detail! *Maddava* is nowhere else associated with meat, and [T.W.] Rhys Davids’ opinion appears to be logical that we have here a dish... of a root, such as truffles, much sought by swine, and which may have been called ‘pig’s joy.’ Such a root we actually have-- this the

<sup>76</sup>C.S. Prasad, *Op. Cit.*: 104-05.

<sup>77</sup>D.II.126-27.

<sup>78</sup>*PED*: s.v. *Sūkara*. Oldenberg (*Ibid*) and Fleet (JRAS: 1906: 656, 881) agree with him.

<sup>79</sup>Ivan Morris, *Madly Singing in the Mountains: An Appreciation and Anthology of Arthur Waley*: 342.

<sup>80</sup>J.VI.531.

<sup>81</sup>Quoted at R.P. Kapleau, *Op. Cit.*, 24.

<sup>82</sup>DB.II.137.

<sup>83</sup>*sampanna-kolaṇ sūkaramaṁsa* (pork with jujube) at A.III.49.

<sup>84</sup>Edward Thomas, *The Life of the Buddha*, London: Routledge, 1949: 149.

<sup>85</sup>A.III.49.

critics did not know-- in our “pignut,”... the little nut-shaped bulbous roots of which, called also ‘earthnuts,’ are liked by both pigs and children.”<sup>86</sup> There is another reason as to why *sūkara-maddava* cannot mean “pork.” Cunda had invited the Buddha to his house. He could not have offered pork to the Buddha as it would have meant violation of the *Tikoṭiparisuddha*.<sup>87</sup> Regarding the meal requirements of the Buddha, the would-be-donors of meals to the Buddha often consulted Ānanda. For example, this is amply clarified by a conversation between Ānanda and a Brāhmaṇa in the *Vinaya Piṭaka*:

“If I were to prepare, my dear Ānanda, rice-milk and honey-lumps (for the monks), would the reverend Gotama accept it from me?”

“Well, my good Brāhmaṇa, I will ask the Blessed One.” And the venerable Ānanda told this thing to the Blessed One.

“Well, Ānanda, let him prepare (those dishes).”

“Well, my good Brāhmaṇa, you may prepare (those dishes).”<sup>88</sup>

To say that the Buddha sanctioned meat-eating after having taken care of certain conditions is quite difficult to accept. He who condemned animal sacrifices in the strongest possible language and also the bloody trades of slaughtering, hunting, and trapping, is difficult to imagine to have savoured the flesh of the same animals. Each human being who eats flesh, whether an animal is killed expressly for him or not, is supporting the trade of slaughtering and contributing to the violent deaths of harmless animals. Anyone familiar with the numerous accounts of the Buddha’s extraordinary compassion and reverence for living beings, for instance, his insistence that his monks carry filters to strain the water they drink lest they inadvertently cause the death of any micro-organisms in the water, could not have imagined that the Buddha allowed their flesh to be eaten. Monks by virtue of their training, their strength of character, and their life purpose are different and stronger than the laity and better able to resist the pleasures of the senses to which ordinary people succumb. It appears that later scribes interpolated the portions relating to meat-eating into the Pāli Tipiṭaka. For over 300 years the scriptures were transmitted orally and as of now they do contain early and later portions.

In the *Puttamamsa Sutta*<sup>89</sup> the Buddha taught his disciples that material food (*kabalāṅkāra āhāra*) should be taken not for pleasures (*davāya*), not for indulgence (*madāya*), not for personal charm (*maṇḍanāya*), not for comeliness (*vibhūsnāya*), but for the sheer necessity of living. While it is admitted that food is the main prerequisite for existence, it is also acknowledged as a principal source of temptation, as an object through which the sense of taste develops into craving. Hence, on numerous occasions temperance with regard to food is advocated, although never to the extent of self-mortification (*attakilamatha*). The ideal monk is described as controlled in deed and word, restrained in food for the stomach (*kāyagutto, vacīgutto, āhāre dare yato*);<sup>90</sup> with light stomach, moderate in food, easily satisfied, and undisturbed (*ūnūdaro, mitāhāro, appicch’assa alolupo*).<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, a person who is immoderate as to food is described as one who thoughtlessly and unwisely takes

---

<sup>86</sup>C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *A Manual of Buddhism*, London: Sheldon, 1932: 260.

<sup>87</sup>Considering that the Buddha had actually made this rule.

<sup>88</sup>SBE.XVII.88.

<sup>89</sup>S.II.98-100.

<sup>90</sup>S.I.172; Sn.78.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.* 707.

food for the sake of amusement, pride, decoration, ornamentation, insatiability, immoderation and thoughtlessness as to food.<sup>92</sup>

A religion that bases its philosophy on *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *upekkhā*, and *muditā* directed towards the welfare of all creatures (*sabbapāṇa-bhūta-hitānukampin*)<sup>93</sup> whose founder rising daily surveyed the world to look for beings to be worthy of his mercy and help,<sup>94</sup> could not have sanctioned meat-eating. A good Buddhist who is expected to be *intent upon compassion* (*karuṇādhimutta*)<sup>95</sup> cannot be expected to live by eating meat acquired in whatever manner. Thus, to put the flesh of an animal into one's belly makes one an accessory to the act of its slaughter, simply because if cows, sheep, fowl, and fish, to mention the most common, were not eaten they would not be killed. With the exception of butchers, hunters and fishermen, who kill the food they eat, the majority of flesh eaters are only indirectly responsible for the violence to and destruction of animals. This, however, does not make them less answerable to the first precept. Thus, all those portions of the Pāli *Tipiṭaka* which condone meat-eating directly as well as indirectly (including the Rule of *Tikoṭiparisuddha*) must be seen as interpolations made by meat-eating bhikkhus after the death of the Buddha.

---

<sup>92</sup>*Puggalapaññatti*, PTS.21; tr.31.

<sup>93</sup>S.IV.314; A.II.210, III.92, IV.249; Pug.57, 68.

<sup>94</sup>D.II.237; Ps.I.126f; DhA.I.26, 367; PvA.61, 195.

<sup>95</sup>D.II.241f.